

Stanley B. Kimball

A Trail Historic Resource Study How I Did One

*Finished Historic
Resource Study for
the Mormon
Pioneer National
Historic Trail.*

America has been experiencing a great “Trail Renaissance” ever since Congress passed the National Trails System Act in 1968 which now covers 20 national historic and scenic trails. Our trails are becoming better known, more fully appreciated, more carefully preserved, and more clearly marked with each passing year. Interest in this aspect of our national heritage continues to grow—there is no indication that it will diminish in the near future.

Since 1968 various bureaus, including the National Park Service, the Bureau of Land Management, and the USDA Forest Service, have been charged with the management, development, interpretation, and protection of these trails. Essential to the federal management of these trails are historic resource studies which document the history, background, and meaning of each trail, and discuss its time frame and relation to American history in general, something about the people who used the trail and their motivation, maps, illustrations, documents, and—most importantly—an inventory of historic sites along the trail. In 1991, I researched and wrote the *Historical Resource Study for the Mormon Pioneer National Historic Trail* under contract to the Denver Trails Office of the National Park Service.

I believe that the best approach to the preparation of such a study—and to the development of a historic site inventory—is to start with old-fashioned homework. Historians talk about a “literature search,” meaning that the first thing to do is to locate and read what has already been written on the subject, to become well acquainted with the history of the trail, the physical trail itself, and the historic sites associated with it. To carry out this step, I sought to visit as many archives and other historical repositories as possible to discover useful primary source materials—especially maps, documents, trail accounts, and old photographs.

Part of this preliminary research involves studying old maps and transferring all significant data onto standard county maps of the one-half-inch-to-the-mile scale. Such maps are generally adequate for office and field research. (Some researchers may prefer the relatively new USGS maps of the 1:100,000 scale, i.e. 5/8 inch to the mile.) At times it is necessary to consult the USGS



7.5 minute quads which are 2-5/8ths inch to the mile. Most indispensable, however, I found are the early General Land Office maps (the famous GLOS) and, equally important, the surveyors' notes for them. These all-important GLOS maps and notes are usually housed in state historical societies and are sometimes available on microfilm. When so available, researchers may, of course, make their own copies on a reader-printer.

I found it particularly important to consult as many published and unpublished contemporary trail accounts as possible. (I have had the good luck to annotate nearly 1,000 Mormon Pioneer Trail accounts.)

Then, after doing the requisite homework and tracing out the old trail and historic sites along the Trail on county maps as best as I could, it was time to get out of the office and archives, out “in the dirt” to experience the power of the places and the spirit of individual locales along this Trail—to test my thinking and mapping and perhaps even identify additional historic sites.

This takes time. I always consider my first field trip as simple reconnaissance, a chance to just try to understand the problem and then work to the solution. Only frustration will result from an attempt to do a historic site inventory during the initial field work. There are at least three categories of historic sites: known and marked, known and unmarked, and unknown and (obviously) unmarked.

We researchers need good boots, for it is necessary to get out and hike around. Sometimes

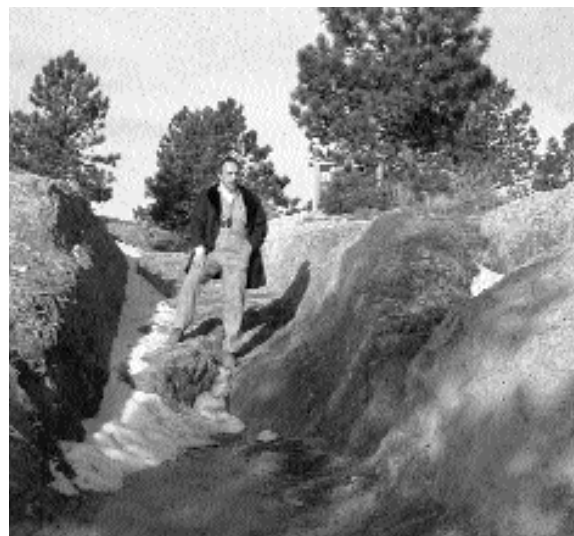
Author Kimball examines dramatic wagon ruts at Guernsey State Park in Wyoming. Photo courtesy the author.

4x4 vehicles are required. (Incidentally, do not be afraid of getting lost. Be adventurous. I made some of my best discoveries—such as new ruts, the real Martin's Cove, the Three Crossings Gorge, and Porter's Rock—when I was not sure just where I was or in very difficult terrain.) Along the way I talk to many people about the Trail. Some locals, including ranchers, farmers, old timers, and postmasters, are remarkably well versed in their area, usually within a county, and willing to show students, a.k.a. "trail nuts," around and share their expertise. I have been guided around by foot, air, and in 4x4s.

I also visit trail-side museums, exhibits, and visitors centers. I often find that the historic site markers mentioned in preliminary research have since been destroyed or moved. It is a sad commentary on human nature that about one out of every 10 marksmen (usually not hunters) enjoy sighting their arms on historic markers and thus damaging or destroying them. Sometimes markers are also vandalized by four-footed critters—markers make excellent scratching posts. The BLM has experimented with vandal-resistant markers.

Trail-side folk are also very proud of their piece of our national heritage. So proud, in fact, that a good many legends and questionable sites crop up. It has always been my policy to be respectful and say something like the following, "Well, that could certainly be true. I don't think it happened to the pioneers of 1847, but it might have happened sometime during the subsequent 20 years of trail use." Everybody ends up happy.

I started serious study and work on western trails—especially the Mormon Pioneer Trail—about 1971, and have written many books and articles and delivered many papers on that subject since. I have also met some of the best people in



the world doing this work. In fact, I have never met any person interested in or connected with our western trails who was not a fine person. I feel that there are several reasons for this, perhaps most significantly the fact that we are a self-limiting group.

A serious and fortunate researcher will, somehow, arrange to fly the trail in a fixed-wing plane or, best of all, in a helicopter—as I once did! In some areas, the BLM has old aerial photos and a stereoscope to help you see how the Trail may have changed over recent decades. Using such photos is the next best thing to actually flying the trails and of great value in site identification and inventory.

The resulting study document is one of which I am very proud. It fleshes out many of the important sites only mentioned in passing when the comprehensive management plan for the Trail was completed in 1981. At 226 pages, it provided me a single venue into which could be assembled the most important bibliographical and map references, photographs and map copies, even songs and portraits from the pioneer companies which are each individually listed. Not only does it provide an exhaustive baseline about the location, significance, and condition of remaining trail-associated sites, but it also tells the Trail story in a way which ties these sites together. Ideally, this historic resource study will be a sourcebook from which trail managers and interpreters will draw for decades to come.

Dr. Stanley B. Kimball is Professor of History at Southern Illinois University in Edwardsville. He also serves as historian for the Mormon Trails Association.

Mormon emigrants in Echo Canyon, Utah, 1860. Photo courtesy Union Pacific Archives.

